DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 454 SO 020 590

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TITLE	We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: African-American Women School Founders and Their Mission.
PUB DATE	89
NOTE	16p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Women's Studies Program, Memorial Hall East, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405.
PUB TYPE	Historical Materials (060)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Black Achievement; *Black Education; *Black Institutions; *Black Leadership; Blacks; Black Students; Black Studies; *Females; Leaders; Postsecondary Education; Secondary Education; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS	Bethune (Mary McLeod); Brown (Charlotte Hawkins); Burroughs (Nannie Helen)

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Nannie Helen Burroughs were women with a mission. It was a mission that combined educational, social, and economic goals. Although different in their tactics and in their educational programs, these women, who founded schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were united in their belief that black women had to assume the initiative in educating themselves and their people. Knowing the harsh realities that blacks, especially women, faced, McLeod and Burroughs focused on the attainment of skills that would provide alternatives to unemployment while teaching leadership and pride. The stereotype of black women as an unfit lot, moved the founders to action in stressing deportment above all else. But as the founders matured in their vision, they began to make important connections between the self-sufficiency of their schools and the self-sufficiency of their communities. Broadening their appeal among blacks by offering more diverse and relevant courses, they increased their black support and became, over time, less dependent on the whims of white philanthropy. (JB)

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We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: African - American women School Founders and their Mission

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Background

The founding of schools for blacks the in the post Reconstruction South was not a novel occurence. Scores of these schools sprung up during the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century. Most of the schools were founded by northern whites acting as church missionaries. Some of the schools were founded by the Freedman's Bureau, a governmental agency charged with easing the transition of blacks from slavery to freedom. In addition to church and federal government involvement, there was also significant support from northern industrialists. Their collective aim was to provide a basic education and training for ex- slaves and their children that would guarantee a dependable labor supply while maintaining racial stratification.

What this paper discusses, however, is not that well-documented history, but the black women who, for reasons of their own, started schools during that same volatile period. It was a period in which racial violence against blacks was rampant. The violence was fueled by the myth of the black rapist which was, in fact, a subtefuge for economic dispossesion of the former slaves. White southerners also feared a potential shift in the power relationship between the races that would threaten their dominance. Black people were attacked with such ferocity and frequency that historian W. J. Cash suspected that the southern white man might be "slipping into bestially" [1]. The attitudes among whites that provoked the violence against blacks was reinforced, almost justified, by racial propaganda that originated in respected academic institutions and in popular journals of the

day. These pronouncement questioned the intelligence and even the humanity of blacks. Black women were not spared in this onslaught. They were victims of lynchings, rape, and murder while being portrayed as "immoral scourges".[2] In 1896, a noted white physician declared in a St. Louis newspaper that there was no black female virgin over the age of sixteen. An editor of a popular magazine wrote that the very idea of a virtuous black woman was inconceivable [3]. The outrage felt by black women because of these scurrilous attacks and the absence of willing defenders among the black male leadership, provided the impetus for the Black Womens' Club Movement. Both the founding of women's clubs and schools by black women were historical incidents that shared a similar purpose and were activated by the desire to defend and to acquit themselves and their race and to provide self-help for unmet social needs. This urge toward self-help has been a continuing theme in African-American history that is reflected in nearly all black institutions. The organizing efforts among black women, however,took on a decidely political thrust as a result of these new threats to their safety and to their self-esteem. The three founders discussed in this paper were all early, if not founding, club women. As first-generation black middle-class women they assumed the self-appointed duty of reversing negative racial stereotypes. They believed that only they, as educated women of high morals and devout Christian faith, could lead black America out of the malaise. As Charlotte Hawkins Brown, founder of Palmer Memorial Institute said, "I wanted to show the world what a black woman could do .[4]

Although the circumstances of the founding of the three schools and the personalities of the women discussed in this paper were different, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Nanny Helen Burroughs

are linked by a shared vision of racial uplift, moral vindication of black women and the economic survival of black people. They believed that if blacks made themselves indispensable as workers and exhibited virtuous living, the racial animosity against them would dissipate .

CHARLOTTE HAWKINS BROWN

The first of the three schools to begin operation was Charlotte Hawkins Brown's Palmer Memorial Institute (PMI) which opened in October, 1902. After being convinced to return to her native state to take a teaching position in an American Missionary Association (AMA) school in Sedalia, North Caroline, Brown soon found herself out of a job when the AMA abruptly withdrew its support. At the age of nineteen-upon the urging of the black community- she embarked upon a fundraising effort that made use of her New England contacts (especially her benefactor, Wellesley College President, Alice Freeman Palmer). This resulted in the the opening of the PMI, named in honor of Mrs. Palmer.[3]

At this point in her life, it is fair to say that Brown probably had no grand educational plans in mind. She was ambitious, however, and liked the idea of having her own school. She had also been around northern white liberals long enough to know that most of them favored a 'practical education' for blacks. (Brown had spent two years at the State Normal School in Salem, Massachusetts on a scholarship given by Ms. Palmer, who although impressed with Brown's knowledge of classical literature, did not consider offering her a scholarship to Wellesley,the elite college for women). Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee experiment, as it was called by its numerous benefactors, was the model that black education- with its emphasis on industrial training-was expected to follow. Thus, PMI was at

first advertised as an institution dedicated to teaching " the colored race... improved methods of agriculture" [6] . However, this type of school did not fit Brown's aspirations or her emerging sense of mission as a black woman. She became involved in the southern interracial movement, acting as an "ambassador" for her race and attempting to dispel the white-held stereotypes of black moral and intellectual laxity. As a founder of the North Carolina Federation of Negro Women's Clubs, she increased her efforts to improve the status and image of black women. Imbued with a curious mix of New England bred aristocratic and Victorian ideas about women and the then popular notion of female moral superiority, Brown felt that black women could overcome the negative stereotypes and be treated "like ladies, " indeed, if they could be taught to "act like ladies"[7] . She wrote in her widely circulated book of etiquette, *The Correct Thing to Do, To Say, To Wear* (1941), that a lady must be "considerate, not overbearing or dictatorial, she must give the boy plenty of room to be to be gracious and chivalrous."[8] It is ironic that she espoused the virtues of marriage and family, yet Brown's two marriages lasted a total of two years. She had no children although she adopted and raised several of her relatives' children.

By the 1940's, the school had completely transformed its curriculm, its purpose and its major source of financial support. In a 1947 article, *Ebony* magazine called PMI the "Groton and Exeter of Negro America." [9] It had become a liberal arts school with a college prepartory curriculum that sent over ninety percent of its graduates to college [10]. Catering to the growing black middle-class who was unhappy with the quality of education offered to black children in public schools, PMI became a national institution with students from over twenty-eight states. An emphasis on cultural education was combined with an underlying work ethic that preached the dignity of

all work. Students were required to give an hour of work to the school each day. By appealing to her own people, Brown has discovered a way to partially free herself from the meddlesome dictates of white benefactors. The transformed school, however, was not free of problems. The change meant that the rural North Carolina blacks for whom the school was founded were displaced by children from families who could pay the $500 yearly tuition. Brown made it clear that she only wanted those students who exihibited "aristocracy of character" who were from a "Christian background".[11] Brown obviously believed that she was carrying out her mission of uplift and racial redemption by educating a group who could display all of the characteristics of the better class of whites and thus become, like her, racial ambassadors. But this strong class bias was not what W.E. B. Dubois had in mind when he coined the term, the 'talented tenth'. DuBois was advocating the training of a cadre of leaders whose talent, not social class, would destine them for a wide range of educational opportunities while infusing them with the spirit of service to the black masses. Brown's emphasis on becoming acceptable to whites led DuBois to refer to her as a representative of the "the white South."[12] But in Brown's view being acceptable did not mean blind imitation of whites. Indeed, Brown considered white culture to be in decline. Acceptability, she felt, was a necessary step in establishing communication with whites. "If I can only render service to both races and if I can have the confidence of both races, there may be acomplished some things that we all desire to see accomplished," she said.[13]

Brown had started the school with rather naive views about the South and certainly no first-hand knowledge about the racial violence and animosity that was part of its heritage. Over the years, she became

increasingly aware of and outraged by the tactics used to suppress blacks. While on a trip by train to a women's interracial meeting, she was denied a sleeping car because the white men on the train objected to having a black woman in their midst. She was forcefully escorted to the black section. When she arrived at the meeting she blasted the hypocrisy of the white clubwomen who talk about interracial co-operation but remain silent as black women are continually victimized by white men. "Control your men," She implored them [14].

Clearly for Charlotte Hawkins Brown, the Palmer Memorial Institute,which had become one of the oldest and most succesful black run institutions when it closed in 1971, was not only a monument to what she, as a black woman, could do, but also a platform from which she could launch her own unique brand of activism in a quest to overcome ignorance, racism, sexism and bigotry.

MARY McLEOD BETHUNE

Two years after PMI was founded, Mary McLeod Bethune opened the Educational and Industrial School for Girls in Daytona, Florida. Upon receiving a scholarship from a white seamtress, Bethune studied at Scotia Seminary in Concordia, North Carolina. The school was run by an interracial staff affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. Its strict discipline and work requirement for students were emulated at her new school. She also attended Moody Bible Institute in Chicago with the goal of becoming a missionary in Africa. When her application for missionary work was denied by the church, she took a teaching position in Augusta, Georgia under the pioneering black educator Lucy Craft Laney, who had started Haines Institute in 1886. Bethune was so inspired by Laney that she decided to follow in her footsteps and open a school. "This is a new kind of

school. I'm going to teach my girls crafts and homemaking. I'm going to teach them to earn a living. They will be trained in head, hand and heart. Their heads to think, their hands to work and their hearts to have faith." [15] Initially, the curriculum offered courses in the domestic arts- sewing, cooking, and handicrafts, as well as academic subjects-reading, writing, mathematics and music. Early on, there was criticism from some blacks who felt that the teaching of good housekeeping and domestic arts was preparing the girls for menial labor. Bethune, using her considerable oratorical skills, eloquently defended her curriculum by stressing her success and contrasting it with the alternative of dependency and degradation facing black women who could not earn a living.

This sad reality silenced most of her critics. Bethune's credibility with the black community was further strengthened by the outreach programs that she introduced. She established a reading room and community center for men and boys, a summer school and playground for children and a farmers' institute to help the area farmers. A very well received response to the needs of the community was the opening of the first hospital for blacks "south of St. Augustine" [16]. The hospital, like most of her other endeavors, grew out of a concrete need. When one of her students became critically ill with appendicitis, Bethune begged a white physician to admit her to the all-white hospital. When Bethune appeared at the door of the hospital a nurse ordered her around to the back. "I thrust her aside and found my little girl segregated in a corner of the porch behind the kitchen. Even my toes clenched with rage,"[17] said Bethune . This encounter led to a fund drive that resulted in a hospital being built with a training school for nurses-the first of the schools founded by a black woman to offer nursing. Business and science courses were soon added to the curriculum and following the hospital, a library was built on campus.

Visitors were unanimous in praising the management, discipline and self-sufficiency of the Daytona school. In less than ten years it had become a showplace for black female achievement-occupying a campus of over fifteen acres and buildings worth over $30,000. [18] Realizing that she was in a very conservative community and was battling both racist and sexist stereotypes, Bethune imposed a spartan-like routine which began with the five-thirty A.M. "rising bell," and proceeded systematically until the lights out bell at nine P.M. [19]. Students and teachers,including Bethune, worked together to make almost all of the essentials of the boarding school including brooms, rugs, mattresses and even the ink used for writing. [20] The school operated a profitable farm that supplied their food, and sold the surplus to the community. By the time it merged with Cookman College for men in 1923, to become Bethune-Cookman College, a co-educational liberal arts institution, Bethune was on her way to becoming one of the most recognized leaders in America.

As an educated black woman, she felt a kind of noblesse oblige toward the less fortunate women of her race. Black women, she felt, needed opportunities for economic and social advancement. Called a "zealous feminist" by her biographer because of her preoccupation with "Negro Womanhood,"[21] she grounded her beliefs in a broad-based concern for the needs of the oppressed black race in general and black women in particular. Bethune's brand of feminism originated with a concern for the plight of the black family and the role that women would play in elevating its status. It was her ambition to prove that black women were equal not only to men, but to women of other races [22]. Like Charlotte Hawkins Brown, she preached the virtues of marriage and family but found marriage incompatible with her life's work. After the birth of her son, she was soon divorced and never remarried.

NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS

Nannie Helen Burroughs, the founder of the National Training School for Girls and Women in Washington, D.C., also espoused home and family yet she never married. Often black women pioneers like Brown, McLeod and Burroughs viewed themselves as 'self-sacrificing' and submerged their personal lives in their work. This missionary zeal and undauntedness are conveyed in Burrough's reference to her work in building her school--"We specialize in the wholly impossible ," she often said. [2] Many black leaders thought that her mission was, indeed, impossible--especially since she insisted on two unusual stipulations: that the major source of support must come from the black community and that the school be located in the nation's capital. Booker T. Washington and others advised against the latter, insisting that black schools would not do well outside the South .[24] Almost all of the male hierarchy of the National Baptist Convention to whom she appealed for help thought that blacks could not sustain their own institution, an attitude that Burroughs denounced. She resented the administrative arrangement of several black schools that allowed whites to "adopt" the institution and dictate its policies. Burroughs had shown her organizational and financial acumen as secretary of the National Baptist Convention's women's Auxiliary. In the nine years that she served, the contributions increased a thousandfold.

After eight years of preparation and "saving her idea",[25] Burroughs opened her school with seven pupils in October, 1909. The purpose of the school, said Burroughs, was "to provide a non-sectarian education that would give all girls a chance to overcome whatever handicaps they might have-regardless of their lack of social or economic pull." [26] The curriculum emphasized courses that would prepare its graduates for missionary work,

and to be"self-supporting, self respecting wage-earners" [27] with skills in domestic arts, secretarial science, teaching, and beauty culture. Burroughs stressed black history and black pride. Hers was the only school to have a department of Negro history that required every student to take a black history course and to pass both oral and written exams on the subject. [28] The school also offered courses in the performance arts as well as a regular high school curriculum and extra curricula activities like basketball and interest clubs that were aimed at developing leadership skills. The curriculum continued to expand and be revised to meet the new needs of its students who were from "all over the United States, Africa, Haiti and the Carribean" [29] . The name was changed in 1929 to The National Trades and Professional School for Women and Girls and moved up to Junior college status. It was also informally known as the school of the three B's; a motto that stressed the virtues of the Bible, the bath and the broom. As in Sedalia and Daytona, the adherence to a strict code of conduct was required. Students were given awards for good behavior and for exibiting such traits as co-operativeness, dependability, honesty and initiative. Smoking, drinking, and cursing were grounds for expulsion.

Like her contemporaries Brown and Bethune, Burroughs was a stirring orator. She used the school as a platform to promote such causes as women's suffrage and anti-lynching legislation. She felt that black women's wise use the ballot would be of greater benefit to the race than its use by black men had been thus far.[30] Burroughs' faith in women was reflected in the school's charter which required that the majority of the board of trustees be women. She wanted to involve ordinary black women in the operation of a national institution that commanded respect from around the world. The Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention became

staunch supporters, contributing about five percent of the operating budget. Burroughs, a tireless fundraiser, raised the rest on her own-graciously accepting the dimes and quarters of community men and women as well as the large contributions from benefactors like black banker Maggie Lena Walker.

CONCLUSION

Brown, Bethune and Burroughs were women on a mission. It was a mission that combined educational, social, and economic goals. Although different in their tactics and in their educational programs, these founders were united in their belief that black women had to assume the initiative in educating themselves and their people. Knowing the harsh realities that blacks- especially women- faced, McLeod and Burroughs focused on the attainment of skills that would provide alternatives to unemployment while teaching leadership and pride. The stereotype of black women as an unfit lot, moved the founders to action-some would argue over reaction- in stressing deportment above all else. Brown's "acquire manners and everything else will come"[31] philosophy is a notable extreme of this position. But as the founders matured in their vision they began to make important connections between the self-sufficiency of their schools and the self-sufficiency of their community. Broadening their appeal among blacks by offering more diverse and relevant courses, they increased their black support and became, over time, less dependent on the whims of white philanthrophy.

More research is needed on these founders and the many others to whom history has not given their due. Serious study of both the obvious and the unrevealed circumstances that informed the behavior of this first group of

college educated black women for whom education was synonmous with self-esteem and service to the race, is long overdue.

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